

# Montana State Legislature

2011 Session

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SCHOOL CHOICE

IN THE STATE

# RVEY

## Montana's Opinion on K-12 Education and School Choice

MONTANA



Many agree with the concept. Some disagree. And some simply want more information. As the public debate continues to grow louder about how best to provide a quality education to all Montana children, it is critical to know the facts and to have a good understanding of public opinion.

This statistically representative poll of 1,200 likely Montana voters measures public opinion on a range of K-12 education issues including school choice.

Prepared by:

Paul DiPerna

The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice

October 2008

This poll released jointly by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, Montana Family Foundation, American Legislative Exchange Council, Black Alliance for Educational Options, Central Montana Homeschool Association, Diocese of Great Falls-Billings Catholic Schools, Diocese of Helena Catholic Schools, Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options, Montana Federation of Independent Schools, and National Catholic Educational Association

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If research adheres to scientific standards, its findings can be relied upon no matter who has conducted it. If rules and methods are neither specified nor followed, then the biases of the researcher or an organization may become relevant, because a lack of rigor opens the door for those biases to affect the results.

We are committed to sound research and to provide quality information in a transparent and efficient manner. We welcome any and all questions related to our methodology and work.

# **Montana's Opinion on K-12 Education and School Choice**

**Prepared by:**

**Paul DiPerna**

**The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice**

**Poll conducted by:**

**Strategic Vision**

**October 2008**

## About the Author



Paul DiPerna ([paul@friedmanfoundation.org](mailto:paul@friedmanfoundation.org)) is director of partner services for the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, an organization dedicated to educating the public on the issue of school choice. He joined the Friedman Foundation in September 2006. DiPerna directs the organization's state polling series and leads grantmaking and direct service activities in more than a dozen states. He previously served as assistant director for the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution, working there for more than six years. DiPerna was a research analyst for the first five issues of the Brown Center Report on American Education (2000-2004), and managed the activities of the National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education (2001-2005).

DiPerna takes a special interest in Internet activity, particularly in terms of discovering and coordinating information, mobilizing people, building social networks, improving organization and management, and amplifying fundraising activities. He has presented research at the American Sociological Association annual conference, and has published articles in *Education Next*, *First Monday*, the *Washington Examiner*, and the *Journal of Information Technology Impact*. DiPerna recently authored a chapter in the *Handbook of Research on Web Log Analysis*, published by Idea Group Publishing.

## About Strategic Vision



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CORPORATE, LITERARY, POLITICAL

Strategic Vision is an Atlanta-headquartered public relations and public affairs agency with a division that specializes in polling. The public affairs team is knowledgeable about politics, issues, and current events throughout the nation. Strategic Vision operates nationally, and its polls have been used by MSNBC, FOX News Channel, *Newsweek*, Bloomberg News, *Time Magazine*, BBC, ABC News, Scripps Howard, the *Washington Times*, and *USA Today*. The company's polls have been cited as some of the most accurate by National Journal's Hotline and Survey USA.

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## Executive Summary

This scientifically representative poll of 1,200 likely Montana voters measures public opinion on a wide range of K-12 education issues. The purpose of the Friedman Foundation's *Survey in the State* series is to measure voter attitudes toward public institutions, leaders, innovative ideas, and the current K-12 power and priority structure. Engaged citizens have shared with us their views about "school choice" in the form of tax-credit scholarships, school vouchers, charter schools and virtual schools. Montana is the seventh state to be surveyed in the last twelve months.

Two findings stand out in this polling project. First, considerable popular support exists for school choice policies and particularly creating a tax-credit scholarship system. Generally speaking, more than three of out five respondents support tax-credit scholarships—this level sustains across such demographics as geographic location, race/ethnicity, political ideology, religion, household income level, among others. There is also majority support for policies creating school vouchers and charter schools.

Second, there is a glaring disconnect between schooling preferences and enrollments. Ninety percent of Montana parents told us they prefer sending their child to a private school, charter school, virtual school, or provide homeschooling. In reality, approximately 7 percent of Montana's K-12 students attend private schools. Charter schools do not exist. In our poll, 37 percent of K-12 parents said they prefer private schools. Ten percent of Montana parents said they prefer a regular public school. In reality, approximately 93 percent of Montana's students attend regular public schools.<sup>1</sup> This disconnect is consistent with what we have seen in other states. States do not have sufficient school choice systems in place to match parents' schooling preferences.

A total of 1,200 phone interviews were conducted by Strategic Vision on September 5 and 6, 2008. The margin of error for the full sample of likely voters is  $\pm 3$  percentage points; the margin of error is higher when considering the number of respondents for a given demographic subgroup.

Key findings include:

- **School choice is not a partisan issue among Montana's likely voters.** Responses to several questions highlight the potential for Democrats (D), Republicans (R), and Independents (I) to work together on systemic reforms. Voters who identify themselves differently in terms of political affiliation are likely to share common views on school choice policies. High levels of support exist for **tax-credit scholarships** (D: 64 percent | R: 65 percent | I: 64 percent), **school vouchers** (D: 55 percent | R: 53 percent | I: 53 percent), **charter schools** (D: 51 percent | R: 54 percent | I: 65 percent), and **personal-use tax credits and deductions for education expenses** (D: 56 percent | R: 53 percent | I: 50 percent).
- **About two out of five Montana voters (42 percent) rate Montana's public school system as "good" or "excellent."** This figure is indicative of a state-level trend that is becoming more clear as the Friedman state polling series moves forward. Satisfaction levels with state public school systems tend to be mediocre throughout the nation.
- **Montanans are content with current levels of public school funding.** More than two-thirds of voters (68 percent) say Montana's level of public school funding is either "about right" or "too high." A third of the respondents (32 percent) said funding is "too low." At least 72 percent of the poll's respondents underestimate the actual per-pupil funding in Montana public schools (\$9,464), which suggests that the previously stated 68 percent statistic is probably a conservative figure.